

Dr. Frank Serafini
Associate Professor

The Evolving Role of the Literacy Specialist

Traditionally, the role of the reading specialist has focused on diagnosing and re-mediating children with reading difficulties in order to prepare them to be successful in meeting the demands of classroom literacy instruction (Bean, 1979; Quatroche, Bean, & Hamilton, 2001). In contemporary school settings the role of the reading specialist has expanded from diagnostician and reading tutor, working with individual students to improve their reading abilities, to literacy coordinator responsible for a school's literacy instruction, professional development workshops, tutoring services and literacy assessment programs (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Jaeger, 1996; Vogt & Shearer, 2003). As the role of the literacy specialist shifts from a traditional focus on diagnosing reading difficulties and remediation to coordinating reading programs, demonstrating best practices, and conducting staff development, how literacy specialists enact their roles is of interest to reading researchers, school and district administrators, and classroom teachers.

The process of bringing new members into communities of practice is relevant to the ways literacy specialists perceive their roles and are perceived by others, thus affecting the ways they are able to perform their role as literacy specialists (Wenger, 1998). Constructing the role of the literacy specialist is

consistent with theoretical perspectives concerning identity construction (McCarthy & Moje, 2002) and the idea of multiple “selves” that are often contradictory, reconstituted and constructed across contexts and time (Broughton & Fairbanks, 2002; Rogers, 2002).

Because of the complexities involved with the expanding role of their positions, literacy specialists are often caught in the quagmire of trying to keep their literacy programs running, get the necessary assessments done to fulfill legislative mandates and complete the enormous amount of paperwork that sometimes comes across their desks, while at the same time trying to help teachers improve their teaching practices and work with small groups of struggling readers when time allows (Bean, 1979). This article reports on research conducted to understand the various roles literacy specialists constructed and enacted as part of the federally legislated Reading Excellence Act (REA) initiated in 2000 across the United States .

Researching the Role of the Literacy Specialist

The focus of this study was to understand how a federal REA grant, focusing on at-risk schools in both urban and rural areas, was used to improve early literacy instruction throughout a state in the Southwestern United States. One of the primary goals of the REA grant was to establish one or two new literacy specialist positions at all schools receiving funding. Along with the establishment of these positions, the goals of the grant included; 1) supporting ongoing professional development for teachers at the selected schools through a

university partnership, 2) expanding school based family literacy programs, and 3) providing early intervention, tutoring, and other forms of assistance to children who are struggling with reading and writing, including students with disabilities and those for whom English is not their primary language.

University, state department and school district partners employed a multi-faceted approach toward the goal of expanding literacy leadership in the state through the design of “high quality” professional development, ongoing face-to-face and online assistance to literacy specialists, and job-embedded professional development for teachers and literacy specialists at their school sites.

The study reported here utilized a variety of data, including, observations of literacy specialists’ monthly meetings, interviews with individuals and small groups of literacy specialists, reflective journal writings, knowledge surveys, and activities conducted during monthly literacy specialist meetings to come to understand the day to day duties and the evolving nature of their roles as literacy specialists.

The Expanding Roles of the Literacy Specialist

A primary assertion constructed during data analysis indicates the roles of the literacy specialists were wide-ranging, going beyond the role of diagnostician and reading tutor, and varied across particular contexts and school settings. This finding is consistent with results obtained from previous studies addressing the roles of literacy specialists (Bean, 1979; Bean, Swan, & Knaub, 2003; Quatroche

et al., 2001). Variations were accredited to inconsistent levels of support from local school administrators, the relationships established between literacy specialists and classroom teachers, the pedagogical and theoretical knowledge literacy specialists brought to the position regarding literacy instruction, and the teaching and mentoring experiences they encountered during their careers.

Although most literacy specialists reported working with small groups of struggling readers, they explained that this was only a small part of their duties. It was reported that their role as literacy specialist included working with budgets, coordinating and conducting professional development activities, providing resources for classroom teachers, organizing literacy resource rooms, demonstrating literacy lessons in classrooms, observing teachers' instructional practices and providing feedback, organizing family literacy nights and community outreach activities, and attending professional development workshops and administrative meetings at the school, district and state level.

When asked about what they perceived as their primary role as literacy specialist, many responded that the most important aspect of their position was to help children that struggled with reading. Many described a "mission-like" approach to their job as literacy specialist, helping underprivileged children learn to read in order to save them from a life of illiteracy. Their work with classroom teachers was to ensure that teachers had the right materials and instructional approaches to help the students in their classrooms learn to read and be successful at school and in life. For many of the literacy specialists interviewed,

the various parts of their jobs that took them away from their role helping students learn to read were regarded as impediments, busy work that they would have preferred to abandoned.

A second assertion constructed during data analysis suggests the identification, dissemination, and implementation of “universal best practices” was seen as a primary responsibility of the literacy specialists. The literacy specialists in this study were also concerned with expanding their pedagogical knowledge base, but not necessarily their knowledge of reading processes and theoretical foundations. The knowledge reported as most important to the literacy specialists focused on learning new and better ways to teach reading, not necessarily more knowledge about basic reading processes or theoretical foundations of literacy development.

One literacy specialist stated it was her job to develop an extensive “bag of instructional tricks” to share with classroom teachers. During the monthly professional development workshops, literacy specialists often wanted to know what was the “best” way to teach particular aspects of reading. The focus was on evaluating and incorporating best practices, not on constructing knowledge or conducting inquiry into their own instructional practices. This is not to be seen as a deficiency of these literacy specialists given the demands of the position, however, it is noteworthy that the literacy specialists, recognized as local experts in literacy instruction, did not see themselves as constructors of knowledge, rather as deliverers of a predetermined set of quality pedagogical techniques.

Additionally, literacy specialists viewed establishing credibility and building rapport with colleagues at their schools as an important aspect of their new position. The majority of comments offered by various literacy specialists during interviews focused on their concerns about how to approach classroom teachers, gain access to their classrooms, and be perceived as a credible source of information. The literacy specialists suggested that some classroom teachers were receptive to the instructional practices and pedagogical approaches offered. They shared accounts of successful partnerships with some classroom teachers, where they were asked to come into classrooms and share teaching strategies. They also shared accounts concerning classroom teachers had little or no desire to work with them, or have them involved in their classrooms. This perception aligns with previous research on literacy specialists, where many researchers have reported a disconnect between the goals of the literacy specialists and those of the classroom teacher (Jaeger, 1996). Classroom teachers need to view the literacy specialist as a support, not as an evaluator, if their presence in classrooms is to be accepted.

However, gaining classroom teachers' trust and building rapport takes time and effort. Much of the literacy specialists time was spent convincing teachers that they were a qualified resource designed to support classroom instruction, not to evaluate teachers. A primary concern reported by literacy specialists in this study was making teachers believe they were a valuable resource and had knowledge of literacy instruction that would be helpful to them

as classroom teachers. Because there are few, if any, formally recognized hierarchies among classroom teachers (King, 1994), literacy specialists are forced to draw upon their rhetorical and communication skills to convince classroom teachers of their expertise and ability to support classroom instruction.

The school community, especially the amount and type of administrative support offered to the literacy specialists, had important implications for how the role of the literacy specialist was constructed. Throughout the study, administrative support was reported as ranging from very involved to “selective ignorance.” Some administrators were deeply involved in the creation and implementation of the literacy specialist position, while others had little or no involvement or knowledge of the intricacies of the job. Literacy specialists that described their administrators as providing little or no support reported being pulled from their duties to substitute teach more frequently. In addition to their usual duties, these literacy specialists reported being asked to coordinate extracurricular activities and conduct formalized assessments with greater frequency than those that reported more administrative support.

Implications for Literacy Education and Instruction

The role of the literacy specialist expanded beyond teachers’ initial expectations, often including roles and expectations that were not originally foreseen. From their perspective, these literacy specialists accepted their positions in order to help children and make a difference in their struggle to develop as proficient readers. However, as was so often reported throughout the

interviews, the other requirements of the position that took them away from classrooms were a source of frustration and concern.

For many of the literacy specialists, in fact over eighty percent, this was their first educational position beyond classroom teaching. Spending time in other teachers' classrooms is very different than spending the day with students tucked away in one's own classroom. Providing professional development workshops and support structures for helping classroom teachers handle the demands of working with other teachers is imperative. Professional development approaches, for example cognitive coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1997) or reflective practices (Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1991), pay particular attention to teachers' cognitive processes, the relationship between coach and classroom teacher, and the specific language used in their interactions.

Determining what is the "best" type of instructional approaches has been a source of frustration in the field of reading instruction and research for many years (Duffy & Hoffman, 1999). Recent research summaries, for example the National Reading Panel (*Report of the national reading panel: Teaching children to read*, 1999) have offered often politically charged insights into the characteristics of effective reading instruction and basic reading processes. Literacy specialists are often challenged to produce evidence that the practices they demonstrate and encourage classroom teachers to adopt are effective and should be emulated. The focus of these reports and the evidence offered in their defense has been categorized under what Street (Street, 1984) has referred to as

an “autonomous model” of literacy. In this model, literacy is conceptualized as a set of universal cognitive abilities or strategies used by literate people regardless of social contexts. When literacy specialists are looking for universal best practices, they are supporting this autonomous model of literacy. Adopting a broader view of what it means to be literate, that includes decoding, meaning making, and analyzing texts (Luke, 1995) is an important consideration for literacy specialists in today’s schools.

Too often, literacy specialists come under fire for being a “teacher without a classroom.” In some instances, the literacy specialists interviewed felt they were a member of the support class, often feeling relegated to a lower status than the classroom teacher. Others reported assuming a leadership role at their school and felt they were an integral part of on-going professional development, school administrative decisions, and the direction of the schools in which they worked. When budgets are reduced, the position of literacy specialists, and other teachers without their own classroom responsibilities are often the first one’s terminated. Until literacy specialists are regarded as an important component for raising the quality of a school’s reading and literacy instruction, these positions may continue to be the first ones cut during the current cycle of reduced educational funding. At the end of the REA grant cycle, over sixty percent of the literacy specialist positions created were cut or reassigned. In fact, many of the literacy specialists in the study returned to classroom teaching after the federal funding ran out.

The needs of individual students should play an important role in structuring the day to day duties of literacy specialists. Being pulled from classrooms for recess duty, to complete paperwork or other extracurricular duties does not seem to be in the best interest of the children in the school. The role of the literacy specialist was intended to support struggling readers and improve the quality of classroom reading instruction. Any requirements that take literacy specialists away from this objective should be greatly reduced.

As the International Reading Association and the National Council Teachers of English, and its associated Literacy Coaches Clearinghouse, begins to establish a research base for the literacy specialist position, the standards outlining the requirements for the knowledge base and skill set of literacy specialists need to be complimented by guidelines for how these positions are enacted in schools. The research reported here, along with other emerging studies on the role of the literacy specialist (Bean et al., 2002; Bean et al., 2003; Dole, 2004; Henwood, 1999/2000), should be used to inform how literacy specialist positions are constructed and how these specialists can work more effectively in their roles. In order to provide support for the literacy specialist position in all elementary, middle and high schools across the country, future research needs to look at the theoretical understandings and knowledge base of literacy specialists, the school climate under which these positions are created, the relationships between classroom teachers and support staff, and the role of local administrators in school reform projects.

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